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ABSTRACT

The practice of treating students as valuable contributors to the educational process can be traced back at least as far as Socrates. Unfortunately, the predominate pattern of pedagogy in the United States has been one of exclusion. Those instructors who are part of recent movement to help their students enter the academic discourse face the problem that the academic discourse itself and the community it represents are amorphous. At best, higher education is a loose confederation of field-specific disciplines. A second problem for composition instructors is that field-specific disciplines seem to be more concerned with preserving the status quo than with furthering the educational growth of the individual. These problems can best be addressed through strong writing-across-the-curriculum programs, programs that allow instructors in specific disciplines to help their students gain entry into their chosen disciplines. Another way to help them gain entry is collaborative learning. Thom Hawkins, in describing the peer tutor program at the University of California at Berkeley's writing center, has shown how collaborative learning functions as a means of enculturation by helping students adapt to the writing styles demanded of them. If there are some dangers in collaborative learning--that the collective voice will drown out that of the individual--the gains, being so great, justify the approach. The teacher must lead by example and be open to a multiplicity of voices and ideas. (Contains 24 references.) (TB)

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Community and Self in First-Year Composition

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Community and Self in First-Year Composition

While reminiscing on his early experiences as a Rhodes Scholar in the 1950s, Willie Morris noted the essential difference in his educational experiences as a student in this country and as a student in England.

> There it was, right at the start, the stark assumption, the monumental confrontation that Oxford embraces the young student as an individual, a participant--not as an outsider or an interloper--in the process of learning. (79)

Morris' insight points toward a problem facing those of us who teach first-year composition: how can we help our students become practicing members of the academic community without sacrificing their individuality? The problem is exacerbated because there is no single academic community; rather, there is a loosely-joined coalition of discipline-defined communities. To further complicate the matter, the majority of our students are seeking membership in academic disciplines other than English.

BACKGROUND

The practice of treating students as valuable contributors to the educational process can be traced back at least as far as Socrates. Unfortunately, the predominate pattern of pedagogy in our country has been one of exclusion. That is, our educational system has tended to expect subservience of its students. Students have been expected to be passive learners, accepting the "knowledge" given to them by their teachers and waiting for

invitations to become participating members of the academic community in general and of their specific disciplines in particular.

As writing instructors have begun to realize the inherent weaknesses of the exclusionary system, there has been a "common call to teach . . . students academic discourse" (Elbow 135). The solution, of course, is not quite as simple as throwing the doors of academe open to first year students.

PROBLEMS

The first problem facing writing instructors who want to help their first-year students enter the academic discourse community is its amorphous nature. It is widely accepted that there is no single academic discourse community; rather, higher education is a loose confederation of field-specific disciplines (Bizzell; Bartholomae; Harris; McCarthy; Stewart).

A second problem for composition instructors is that the field-specific disciplines in academe seem to be more concerned with preserving the status quo than with furthering the educational growth of the individual. As Rose has noted,

> the thrust of graduate training and the professional commitment that follows from it are toward the preservation of a discipline, not the individual development of young people. (197).

There is an ethical problem which stems from the the exclusionary nature of academic disciplines. Some instructors feel that helping students enter the discourse communities of

their chosen disciplines merely perpetuates the exclusionary nature of higher education and denies students their ethnic heritages and their individual natures. While these are valid concerns, the reality is that success in the various academic disciplines and their derivative professions is based on the ability to communicate effectively in these disciplines and professions. In short, success in school and success on the job are dependent on one's understanding of and ability to use the language of the respective discourse community. Any instructor who refuses to accept this reality and to help his or her students to adapt to the general and specific discourse communities of higher education is acting irresponsibly. For as Elbow has noted,

> Not to help [students] with academic discourse is to simply leave a power vacuum and thereby reward privileged students who have already learned academic discourse at home or in school--or at least learned the roots or propensity for academic discourse. (135)

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

The problem presented by the cloudy nature of academic discourse can best be addressed through strong writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC) programs, programs which allow instructors in specific disciplines to help their students gain entry into their chosen disciplines. Overviews of such programs can be found in the following texts: Teaching Writing in All Disciplines (Griffin); Strengthening Programs for Writing Across the Curriculum (McCleod); Teaching Writing in the Content Areas:

College Level (Tchudi); Writing Across the Disciplines (Young and Fulwiler). WAC programs, however, are long-term solutions. What can the writing instructor do in the short term?

Bizzell has suggested that "students and teachers should work collectively toward achieving consensus on a pluralistic grouping of ways to do academic discourse" (663). A logical point of departure in moving toward this consensus is to treat students with respect, recognizing the ability and desire we all have to learn when presented with worthwhile goals, when placed in a friendly environment, and when treated as a valued contributors to the group.

Those of us lucky enough to have been invited early on by gifted teachers to become participating members of our chosen discourse community know well the pleasure and meaning that invitation gave to our educational experience. Stewart, writing about Fred Newton Scott's invitations to his students, noted that early in this century Scott "was gathering his students around a table, leading them gently with probing questions, and, in the words of the students who admired and loved him, 'teaching us to educate ourselves'" (65). Rose, writing of much more recent experiences with teachers who viewed themselves as mentors and facilitators and who viewed their students as valuable contributors to the educational experience, noted,

> These four men collectively gave me the best sort of liberal education, the kind longed for in the stream of blue-ribbon reports on the humanities that now cross my

> desk. I developed the ability to read closely, to persevere in the face of uncertainty and ask questions of what I was reading . . . . My teachers modeled critical inquiry and linguistic precision . . . . They encouraged me to make connections and to enter into conversations--present and past--to see what talking a particular kind of talk would enable me to do with a thorny philosophical problem or a difficult literary text. (58)

In short, Rose's mentors provided him with an environment which allowed him to fail--if need be--without catastrophic results. They also gave him--through their modeling--the wherewithal to succeed in the academic community: the ability to think critically and to use language effectively.

What Stewart and Rose have described is one method of empowering students to take active roles in their own education. Another way students may be given responsibility for their education is through collaborative learning. Bruffee ("Conversation" and "Models") has long been a spokesperson for the value of collaborative learning as a means of allowing students to help educate themselves. Reynolds has suggested that another value to collaborative learning is that under the proper direction and in the right environment collaborative learning can help students adapt to communities similar to the ones they will encounter in the workplace.

Hawkins, in describing the peer tutor program in the University of California at Berkley's writing center, has shown how collaborative learning functions as a means of enculturation by helping students adapt to the writing styles demanded of them in the university. Hawkins believes the tutors, who work with

freshmen and sophomores from a variety of disciplines, are successful for two reasons: the tutors share an underclassman bond with their tutees, and the tutors have more time to work one on one with their tutees than instructors have. Hawkins also believes the tutors are successful in helping their charges adapt to the discourse communities of their various disciplines because the tutees recognize the need

> to have power over their environment, to be in control of what happens to them, and they sense that they must learn to manipulate language the way their teachers do before they will be able to play the game the way academic insiders do." (65)

While collaborative learning is an effective means of helping students develop the socialization skills needed for success in the workplace and an effective means of helping students adapt to the needs of their specific disciplines, there is also an inherent danger in collaborative learning: a danger that the individual voice may be drowned out by the collective voice. Weddle, in describing the collaborative nature of the writing workshop approach used in most creative writing programs, notes that while there are exceptions, too often the result of this method of teaching creative writing is the "workshop story" with 'the same bland homogenized prose style and by the numbers plot" (120).

Ritchie's description of a writing workshop approach to freshman composition at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln points out the same danger. One student, Brad, can into the

course with a strong religious conviction, which directed much of his thought and action. The instructor, who had philosophical differences with Brad, was gifted enough not to let the differences affect his teaching. "Brad's group, on the other hand, . . . [attempted] to pull him to their own implicit norms" (167). Brad came out of the course a stronger writer, not because of the group but because of his ability to resist the group. "[He] refused to become the unopinionated, tolerant person with whom his peers . . . would have felt more comfortable" (170). But what of students less strong than Brad? Is it not likely that they will leave the group as mirrors of the group, reflecting adaptation but little individual growth?

Nevertheless, despite the very real danger of sacrificing the voice of the individual for the voice of the group, there is too much to be gained from collaborative writing to turn away from it. Recognizing the inherent weaknesses in collaborative learning is the first step in implementing successful collaborative learning experiences. As Wiener points out, collaborative learning involves much more then "reshuffling chairs, . . . telling [students] to work together in groups, or . . . requiring, without further guidance, that they read each other's papers" (61).

In order for a collaborative learning experience to be successful, the teacher must establish guidelines and goals for individual assignments. Also, students must reach a consensus--among themselves and with the teacher--as to what is expected from an assignment. One effective means of reaching such a consensus is to establish, early on, areas of what Reigstad and McAndrew call Higher Order Concerns (focus, development, voice, organization) and Lower Order Concerns (punctuation, usage, spelling, sentence structure). Once the criteria for evaluation have been fixed for the course (or for a specific assignment), groups can be trained to recognize and comment positively on both the strengths and weaknesses of writing assignments. Even after the criteria has been established, however, it is important to not simply turn groups loose.

Peer groups have difficulty keeping focused on the task at hand, rather than on upcoming campus events (Danis). Groups may also have trouble keeping Lower Order Concerns subordinate to Higher Order Concerns. Consequently, it is necessary for the teacher to move from group to group in dual role of facilitator and resource person. The teacher must be careful, however, not to take over the group on these "visits" and careful not to stay so long as to inhibit the actions of the group.

Giving students the freedom to experiment and to take risks with their writing is necessary for the creation of the proper environment for collaborative learning. When students take

risks in generating and presenting ideas, real growth in learning takes place (Kutz; Rose). Students can be encouraged to take risks in their writing through ungraded assignments and by being given the opportunity to revise written assignments for improved grades. If students are led to believe that each assignment must be error free, it is unlikely that they will attempt to move toward developing styles or ideas unfamiliar to them. Consequently, they will remain outside of the unfamiliar academic discourse community. Risk taking can also be encouraged by providing continuity for individual groups. This continuity can be established keeping students in the same groups for several weeks.

In order to avoid the danger of individual voices being subordinated to the collective voice of the group, the teacher must lead by example and be open to a multiplicity of voices and ideas. I have also found it useful to use triads, for this limited size lessens the collective pull of the group and also lessens the opportunity for group members to hide in the shadows of others. It is also important, for the development of the individual voice, to establish a ratio for assignments which favors the individual.

CONCLUSION

It is important to remember that despite the dangers involved and despite the difficulties of implementation, collaborative learning is perhaps the most effective means we

have of helping our students become participating members of the academic community. Collaborative learning opens different avenues of learning and cognition for our students by allowing them to use their own language and ideas to develop meaningful strategies for entering the academic community. Collaborative learning allows our students to draw on their collective experiences--successful and unsuccessful, past and present--in developing the language and skills needed for success in their specific disciplines and in the academic community in general (Elbow; Tobin; Trimbur).

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